

Walking with Martin

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By the Rev. CJ McGregor

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This morning, as we once again devote this third Sunday in January to honor and remember the great legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we must do so in the terrible and divisive shadow of what is happening in many other angry communities all across the country. King's leadership in the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama is a well-known event of 1965. Imagine the South in 1964 and earlier, strategies and tactics to promote voter suppression, innocent youth murdered and justice never arriving, and systematic racism permeating the culture.

Oh! Did I say 1964? I meant 2019.

I've spent a lot of time in reflection on the legacy of King this month. Martin Luther King, Jr., sat in Unitarian churches in Boston in the 1950s. In an interview with a UU minister, his wife, Coretta revealed that Dr. King considered joining the Unitarians. To explain, Mrs. King said something like, "We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian." I recently re-read the book *Black Pioneers* written by the Unitarian Universalist minister Mark Morrison-Reed. I had the pleasure of spending three days with Reed last fall and our time together has changed my ministry. Reed tells stories of his black family arriving at a white Unitarian church in the 1960's. The book chronicles the lives of black pioneers in a white denomination.

He writes, "The Unitarian Universalist church and others like it will remain largely segregated until there is a twofold transformation: one in society, the other within the church. First, on a societal level, it is essential that Unitarian Universalists and other liberal religionists never forget that political and economic freedoms are the mainstay of intellectual freedom, and that inequities and injustice subsequently undermine all freedom. This realization presses us to take seriously the cliché that until all of us are free, none of us is truly free. It is a 'moral imperative,' then, that we commit ourselves to the establishment of a just society. The result of this endeavor will be the evolution of a society potentially more responsive to Unitarian Universalist values. Second, within the liberal church, the transformation would begin with the strengthening of our spirituality through an enriched story — a story that exposes our commitment to freedom, shakes up our class bias, sensitizes us to the needs of others, strengthens our sense of human connectedness, and, finally, inspires us to struggle with others for freedom."

Unitarians and Universalists haven't always been on the cutting edge of racial equity. There is a dark moment in our past that is labelled "The Walk Out." that I told you about a couple of weeks ago. In 1965, came the murder of the Rev. James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister, while he was in Selma, Alabama, demonstrating for black civil rights. Second, only four years later, many black delegates and their white supporters walked out of the General Assembly in Boston

to protest what they considered a racist vote. What had seemed so obvious after Selma -- that in the fight for racial justice it was “us” (the good guys) vs. “them” (the racists) -- suddenly wasn’t so obvious after all. The line between “us” and “them” no longer seemed so clear.

Why? What had happened? We’re still struggling with these and related questions. Perhaps the search for answers can help us build on the things we have done right and improve on the things we have done badly since the UUA was formed. The national revulsion at the Selma murders -- Viola Gregg Liuzzo, a UU from Detroit, was murdered in a separate incident in Selma -- led Congress finally to pass long-delayed civil rights legislation. Thus, the Reeb martyrdom became enshrined as proof of our racial sanctity, along with the famous story of how the Rev. Theodore Parker kept a pistol in his desk drawer to fight off anyone trying to recapture the fugitive slaves he was harboring. Parker, renowned as the most charismatic Unitarian preacher of the mid-19th century, said of the Rev. Ezra Stiles Gannett, a supporter of the fugitive slave law -- which required the capture of runaway slaves who had fled to free states -- “He is calling on his church members to kidnap mine.” What we recall less often is that Gannett, too, was a Unitarian.

Clearly our hyped unity on the issue of race is not the whole story. Even Reeb’s death did not evoke the same emotions from all UUs. In 1968 Heyward Henry, chair of the newly formed Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus said, “We Unitarian Universalists like to keep saying, ‘But we went to Selma with you ... why are you [blacks] rejecting us?’ he continues, “In Selma, a black man named Jimmy Jackson was killed and at that time you could count the number of Unitarians in Selma on your fingers. A few weeks, later a white man was killed, and all Unitarians ran to Selma.

Recently I poured over the article and photographs of the ‘Freedom Journey 1965’ Photographs by Stephen Somerstein of the march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., from the exhibition at the New-York Historical Society. Holland Cotter of the New York Times writes, “Scads of photographers were on the job that day and, inevitably, certain subjects -- political leaders, visiting celebrities -- were the focus of many cameras, including Mr. Somerstein’s. Yet most of the people in his pictures are not stars; they’re rank-and-file participants. It’s from their perspective that we see the march. In one shot, we’re in the middle of it, surrounded by fellow walkers. In others, we’re looking out at bystanders who line the way: white office workers; hecklers; multiracial shoppers; African-American children on porches; women, dressed in Sunday best, on the steps of black churches. Cotter tells us that “this viewpoint subtly alters a standard account of the event, one perpetuated in “Selma,” which suggests that a small, elite band of high-level organizers were the heroes of the day. They were indeed heroes, but they were borne on the shoulders of the countless grass-roots organizers who paved the way for the march and the anonymous marchers, many of them women, who risked everything to walk the walk.”

When I speak of pioneers I am not necessarily only speaking of those leading, first in line, or those who have their names memorialized. The pioneers I am speaking of are the people caught in the Freedom March photographs, the people, black and white, walking out of the 1969 General Assembly, the people I will march with tomorrow celebrating the legacy of King. These are the pioneers that operationalized the dreams and the hopes of leaders. These are the people who were, who are, struck down, these are the people that dare to pursue equality.

Typical, everyday people. Us. We are the pioneers in the movement for racial equity today. I refuse to believe that preaching equality each January, attending a single program on a Thursday night, or writing a check is enough. It isn't.

Young, old, and in between we as Unitarian Universalist have our own legacy to attend to. We cannot offer ourselves passively. 1965 has returned. We have replaced the martyrs Reeb and Luizo with Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner. How will we pioneer? How will we learn from our mistakes and bring equity to our communities and sanctuary? We are the pioneers. We are the liberal voice in South Florida. Our hope lies not only in the inner strength that our religion teaches us to nurture, but also in the example of those who went before to show us the way. They built a church for us, and it is ours to hand on to our children and to their children.

“Will we forsake this legacy?”, writes Rev. Scott Alexander. “On this -- Martin Luther King holiday 2019 - the 33rd year it has been officially celebrated in America -- race relations are at least as strained and endangered as they have been at any other time in our recent national history. Let us therefore promise ourselves -- this day -- that we will each lend ourselves to being (as the old saying goes) “part of the solution,” rather than “part of the problem.” Let us focus on cultural transformation” rather than cultural “blame.” And most important of all, let us keep our hearts open to every last of our fellow Americans no matter what human shade of the skin” Martin Luther King Sunday reminds us that this work is as important as it is difficult.

As I was thinking about what to say to honor Dr. King's birthday, I came across a collection of his sermons, entitled “Strength to Love.” During the 1960s, I felt tremendous respect for Dr. King and his struggles, but from my Northern white perspective, I saw him primarily as a civil rights leader. The more I read of Dr. King's writings, the more impressed I am with the breadth and depth of his vision. He was way more than a civil rights leader – he was a visionary and a modern-day prophet. He challenged America to live up to its highest ideals. He voiced the concerns of oppressed people everywhere, realizing that no one could be free until all of us are free. He was a founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which had a purpose far broader than uplifting the rights of African- American people – although that in itself remains a monumental task. No – tellingly – the motto of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was “To save the soul of America.”

To save the soul of America. Dr. King dreamed of an America – and of a world – in which people of all races and ethnicities, all religions, men and women, would live in peace, harmony, and justice.

In her preface to the 1981 edition of “Strength to Love,” Dr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, wrote:

“The struggle to eliminate the world's evils – evils so flagrant and self- evident that they glare at us from every ghetto street and rural hovel – can only occur through a profound inner struggle. By reaching into and beyond ourselves and tapping the transcendent moral ethic of love, we shall

overcome these evils. Love, truth, and the courage to do what is right should be our own guideposts on this lifelong journey. Martin Luther King Jr. showed us the way; he showed us the dream ...”

Love, truth, and the courage to do what is right should be our own guideposts. Yes, and they could serve pretty well as guideposts for Unitarian Universalists as well. Despite the fact that he was immersed in a bitter struggle, one that often turned to hatred and violence, Martin Luther King maintained his commitment to the power of love. He refused to give in and to respond in kind to the hatred that was often directed at him and at other African-Americans. He continued to believe that Love was the only way to change things for the better.

So let's once again get about it ... now ... together ... that America can (one day soon) become true to its promise to all its citizens. May the light of reason, the comfort of kindness, the depth of a growing spiritual life, the outreach of action, and the acceptance of our own goodness and potential always be our inspiration and the source of our continuing gratitude to our founders and to those who have carried the torch that we hold high.

May it be so.